

LETTERS FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE FROM LI PO

letter 1:

one is not safe even here.
and yet a death without laughter and tears
would not be worth dying for.

letter 8:

when young I asked a wise man
to teach me the nature of wisdom --

foolishness, he said.

letter 9:

Li Po, I said,
men despise the age.
they grow heavy with despair --
even the poets bleed.
what is heavy sinks, he said.

letter 36:

on a very ancient road
from a very ancient land
I met three wise men begging alms.
alms for the wise, they said --
I,
begging wisdom,
gave them bread.

letter 37:

on mountain paths,
snow,
and my footprints --
who comes behind
shall discover,
still fresh,
this poem.

letter 38:

once
in the southern wilderness
I came upon an aged lion.
dear Li Po,
he exclaimed,
do you not remember me,
companion of your youth?

oh,
I said,
how old you have grown.
what has befallen you?
Life,
he said.

letter 39:

dear friend,
I said,
I have searched all my life for truth
yet I have learned nothing.
perhaps you have learned truth,
he said.

letter 40:

death is only in the mind.

letter 41:

nothing is certain,
I said.
not even the past,
said the lion.

letter 42:

dear friend,
I said,
men of these times are so concerned with appearance.
how may one avoid these fashions?
by wearing one's own skin,
he said.

letter 44:

where may I find guidance in religious matters?
I asked the lion.
in heaven,
he answered,
or in hell.

letter 45:

once
on a road to the south
I met my dear friend the lion.
I have come from the mountains,
he said,
and I have spoken with master Lao.

what message?
I asked eagerly.
that mountains too are dust,
he said.

letter 47:

I saw a man mistreat an animal.
I was infuriated.
one must be ugly inside,
I thought,
to enjoy another's pain.
then I realized
how deeply I had wanted to hurt the man.

letter 48:

how may one separate false from true?
I asked the lion.
by a moment,
he said.

letter 49:

where may one escape from time?
I asked.
into the past,
said the lion,
or into the future.

letter 50:

when young
feeling powerless in the face of events
I withdrew.
something I loved is dying,
I said.
then asked the lion:
would you leave it to vultures,
even as it lives?

letter 51:

dear lion,
I said,
one cannot live in this world without a sword.
dear Li Po,
he answered sadly,
there is nothing so sharp,
and nothing so dull.